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FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL CRIME LAB BACKLOG REACHED 500,000 IN 2002

WASHINGTON — The nation's public forensic crime labs ended 2002 with more than 500,000 backlogged requests for forensic services, compared to 290,000 requests that were backlogged at the beginning of the year — a 70 percent increase, the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) announced today. The labs received more than 2.7 million new requests during 2002.

The BJS study of the nation's 351 federal, state and local forensic crime labs, conducted in 2003 and 2004, is the first such census of publicly funded forensic crime laboratories and included 33 federal, 203 state or regional, 65 county and 50 municipal labs with about 9,400 full-time employees.

The labs vary in their capacity to conduct various types of analyses. While about nine in 10 labs can identify controlled substances, about six in 10 can conduct biology screening, firearms and toolmarks analyses, crime scene evidence collection, latent print analysis or trace evidence assessments (such as paint chips or other non-biological materials). About half the labs can process DNA evidence and conduct toxicology analyses. About one in four labs reported being able to examine questioned documents and about one in nine said it had the capability to conduct forensic computer analyses.

Nationwide, crime laboratories received about 2.7 million requests for forensic laboratory services and were able to process just under 2.5 million of these requests during the year. The most frequently requested forensic laboratory service, the identification of controlled substances, resulted in nearly 1.3 million requests during the year or about half of all requests. Toxicology samples (468,000) and latent print requests (274,000) were the next most common types of samples for which laboratory analyses were requested. Law enforcement agencies submitted about 61,000 requests for DNA analysis — about 2 percent of all requests for laboratory services, to publicly operated crime labs — just under 42,000 of these were processed during the year.

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About nine in 10 labs that handle fingerprint identifications reported that they have the capability to process fingerprints utilizing the automated fingerprint identification system (AFIS) that checks an electronic fingerprint database. This enables labs to search large local, state and national databases to determine the identity of prints collected from crime scenes.

Crime lab directors reported a generally close correspondence between expected productivity of lab personnel and actual work completed. For example, on average, they reported that a lab analyst was expected to process approximately 892 requests for controlled substances per year — the actual output was 810 per examiner for the year. DNA analysts were expected to handle 74 requests annually with an actual measured performance of 67; latent print examiners were expected to process 264 requests annually but actually completed 286 latent print analyses.

Sixty-one percent of the labs were accredited by the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors Lab Accreditation Board, and an additional 10 percent were accredited by some other organization. Most labs reported that, consistent with standards in the field, they adhered to established standardized protocols for fingerprint examination, controlled substance analyses and DNA testing.

The report, “Census of Publicly Funded Forensic Crime Laboratories, 2002” (NCJ-207205), was written by BJS statistician Matthew J. Hickman and Joseph L. Peterson, of the University of Illinois, Chicago. Following publication, this document can be accessed at:
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/cpffcl02.htm.

Additional information about Bureau of Justice Statistics statistical reports and programs is available from the BJS website at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>.

The Office of Justice Programs provides federal leadership in developing the nation's capacity to prevent and control crime, administer justice and assist victims. OJP is headed by an Assistant Attorney General and comprises five component bureaus and two offices: the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the National Institute of Justice; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; and the Office for Victims of Crime, as well as the Office of the Police Corps and Law Enforcement Education and the Community Capacity Development Office, which incorporates the Weed and Seed initiative and OJP's American Indian and Alaska Native Affairs Desk. More information can be found at www.ojp.usdoj.gov.

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